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Virtual social media spaces, a relational arena for 'bearing witness' to desistance

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Title: Virtual social media spaces, a relational arena for 'bearing witness' to desistance.

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Abstract: This paper considers the benefits of participating in a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project funded through a mid-career fellowship scheme and hosted at an independent, part community funded resettlement scheme (RS), located outside of the prison estate in England, for men released on temporary licence (ROTL) and others on community sentences referred through probation (trainees). After two years, two interrelated and significant outcomes have emerged, firstly, that the PeN project through the co-creation of blog posts, has given trainees an opportunity to imagine future selves (Giordano et al 2002, Hunter and Farrall 2018), with the research encounter a means of bearing witness to this and the trauma of criminalisation (Anderson 2016). Secondly, creating and posting PeN project blogs has created a virtual space for these imagined future selves to be articulated and crucially, it gives trainees' families, friends and the wider community a means of also bearing witness to trainees' desistance narratives (Anderson 2016).

Introduction:

There is a long-standing tension between risk assessment/managerial responses to problems of recidivism in the criminal justice system and relational interventions that value human relationships (McNeill 2006, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Farrall et al 2015). Current practices in 'offender' management, particularly in England and Wales, increasingly follow the former approach, with a focus on managing risk. Anderson (2016) argues that this approach silences the lived experience of criminalised individuals, discrediting "offenders as human subjects and rendering them objects of policy" (Anderson 2016:409). Relational interventions on the other

hand, provide probation or criminal justice social work (Scotland) an opportunity to 'bear witness' to desistance, which Anderson (2016) contends is vital for 'offenders' in becoming active agents in their own desistance narratives. Moreover, as Anderson (2016) continues, it is important to attend to what 'offenders' value and the meanings they ascribe to criminal behaviour as this helps to establish relationships "that provide relational goods (such as trust or loyalty) (Weaver and McNeill 2015; Weaver 2016) or recognition (Barry 2015)" (Anderson, 2016:409). In addition, a critical role is played by the audience in co-creating desistance, as Anderson (2016) claims:

bearing witness is to see, attend to and testify to lived experience and is linked to ideas of narrative, voice and truth... [whereby] the co-creation, performance and acceptance of the desistance narrative can facilitate a shift from object to subject, increasing feelings of personal agency and enabling the transformation in narrative identity that takes place in desistance from offending (Anderson, 2016:409).

Anderson (2016) also suggests that bearing witness to desistance does not have to be face-to-face but can "happen through art and rituals that enable the act of bearing witness to be sustained through time and space" (Naef 2006)' (Anderson, 2016:412). In this article I therefore focus on the potential benefits for criminalised individuals in engaging in a meditated virtual dialogue through social media blogs and posts, in the context of becoming co-creators of meaningful desistance narratives. This sits within a wider field of desistance theory that stresses the role of the community and social relationships in 'offender' interventions (McNeill 2006, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Weaver 2016).

In the remainder of this article I explain what is understood by 'bearing witness' in the context of developing a relational approach to desistance. In the findings and discussion section, the evidence I provide comes from a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project, which makes use of social media, blog posts and photographs taken by trainees at a resettlement scheme (RS) that works with

prisoners released on temporary licence and other 'offenders' referred through probation, collectively called trainees. I therefore provide details about the RS that hosts the PeN project, as well as the aims and objectives of the PeN project itself. I outline the PeN project's methodological approach, and discuss findings, with evidence provided from one person's desistance journey, using blog posts, corresponding feedback posted via the website and Facebook. I conclude by suggesting that the PeN project provides a useful virtual social space for 'bearing witness' to desistance. This includes a social space for audience responses that reflect and validate the participant's desistance narratives.

Background:

Desistance is conceptualised as the study of change in criminality (defined as a propensity to offend) (Weaver 2016:9), rather than a complete cessation of criminal activity that can only be conferred upon an individual posthumously (Maruna 2001). Contemporary desistance theories emphasise both the social and relational (McNeill 2012, 2013, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Weaver 2016) as well as the individual and agentic (Hunter and Farrall 2018) when (re)building non-criminalised identities. Moreover, the notion that desistance is both an individual *and* social process is significant and there are a number of key authors working in the field. For example, McNeill (2006) claims desistance is not just a private business but a social process (McNeill 2006). Indeed, the stigmatising master status of the criminalised label, ensures that criminalised individuals remain one of the most "vilified, marginalised and excluded group[s]" (McNeil and Weaver 2010:28). Hence in the context of 'bearing witness' to desistance creating a social space for 'rebuilding social relationships' (McNeil 2012:13), that enables individuals to gain a 'stake in conformity' (McNeill and Weaver 2010:54) is important.

Furthermore, whilst it is acknowledged that desistance is faltering, uncertain and punctuated by relapse (McNeil and Weaver 2010), and not linear or predictable, it also incorporates relational, inclusive and interactional practices (Weaver 2016). Hence, relational interventions need to be dialogical and reinforce a sense of 'witness' (Weaver 2016), as 'problems' of desistance are social as well as individual, they

are not just a private business (McNeil 2012). In this context, bearing witness to desistance narratives encourages a form of de-labelling, with positive behaviour recognised and reflected back (Maruna and LeBel 2003). This is underpinned by the implicit belief that under the right circumstances people can change and grow (Anderson 2016). Indeed, when moving from 'offender' to 'non-offender' identities, social reaction is important, the change in behaviour needs to be recognised by others and reflected back (McNeil and Weaver 2010). In this context, Nugent and Schinkell (2016) discuss 'relational desistance', which is the need for change to be recognised by others. Moreover, Cody (2001:289) although describing a personal presence in terms of bearing witness, outlines three necessary elements, firstly 'being there, seeing or hearing' or actually 'witnessing' the narrative. Secondly that this is a temporal process and thirdly that there is some means of expressing understanding or empathy for the person's narrative journey.

Indeed, Anderson (2016) argues that bearing witness to desistance and the trauma of criminalisation and penalisation is significant in the co-creation of desistance narratives. For potential desisters to be understood, not condoned, she argues that: "desistance occupies a moral space that includes what the community owes to the offender as well as what the offender owes to the community" (Anderson 2016:420). In Anderson's work she highlights the significance of probation/criminal justice social work in bearing witness to desistance and highlights the critical role played by the audience, whether this is face to face, through art or ritual. Hence, the audience has "a critical role testifying to experience and as co-creator of the narrative" (Anderson 2016:412). Moreover, citing Butler (2004:44), Hunter and Farrall (2018: 292) argue that "individuals embarking on change request recognition of their ability to change – it is recognition which they seek" and this is important when bearing witness to desistance.

The PeN project and the Resettlement Scheme (RS)

The Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project was initially part of a 12-month Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) mid-career fellowship that started in September 2016 ([link 1](#)), but is now an on-going, integral part of the evaluation of an

independently funded resettlement scheme (RS). The RS offers through the gate support to men released on temporary licence (ROTL) from the local prison on work placements and others (men and women) on community sentences, who are referred through probation, collectively known as trainees. The PeN project was developed with two interrelated aims, to enable trainees at the RS to create visual, self-reflective narratives about their time at the scheme, and to engage the wider community through online blog posts that included both photographs and autobiographical reflections ([link 2](#)). These posts are uploaded onto a bespoke website, which is promoted through social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The RS hosting the PeN project, is a unique, fully independent, part community funded, charitable incorporated organisation (CIO), which has worked with over 80 trainees in a rural location *outside* of the prison estate in England, since July 2013. It is unusual in that it is an enhanced work placement operating outside of the prison estate in England, offering individualised, bespoke support and training in a range of skills. The RS works closely with the prison and probation. Trainees on ROTL are usually recruited to the scheme for 6-9 months prior to release for through the gate support. Those on community sentences have variable commitments to the RS and may attend from one to five days per week. The RS has 1250+ registered supporters who receive regular newsletters, and includes a smaller number of volunteers, visitors and stakeholders who engage with the RS on a regular basis. Gaining a ROTL to attend the RS is optional and a privilege only open to prisoners on the resettlement wing of the local prison, who are not on life sentences or have Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). All trainees are screened for suitability and willingness to change before being accepted. This means that around half of the trainees occupy an unusual position as they are serving prisoners working outside of the prison estate and subject to non-prison social norms and values.

The RS offers an enhanced work experience for trainees and develops bespoke action plans loosely based on a strengths-based approach to resettlement (Hucklesby and Wincup 2007). For example, the RS works with trainees to overcome

social problems, notably those around accommodation, finance, employment and relationships, as whilst these might be insufficient as motivators for desistance, they are important to progress change (Burnett and Maruna 2004). Further, the RS is in a unique position as it can choose to work with those who are ready to change, whilst understanding the zigzag nature of the process of desistance (Maruna and Farrall 2004). To generate and motivate people in the processes of change the RS:

provides training and work experience in practical skills - such as landscaping, vegetable growing, carpentry and construction – as well as developing life and employability skills, building responsibility, team work and confidence.
(RS handbook v9 January 2017)

Moreover, the RS is interested in community support for its trainees “in order to build and create a master status that breaks free from the offender/ ex-offender dyad, it considers repair, reconciliation and community partnership important” (Halsey and Deegan 2015:21). Moreover, the RS provides an important non-prison space for its trainees to imagine a (non-offending) future self (Giodarno et al 2002, Hunter and Farrall 2016), as well as opportunities for the development of real and imagined social capital.

Methods:

There are two inter-related aims of the PeN project, firstly to enable trainees to tell their stories in their own words, illustrated through the photographs they take to record their time at the RS and secondly to enable the community to engage with the trainees through a bespoke website/blog posts and associated social media. The PeN project draws on a participatory style, photovoice and visual autobiography, alongside an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to research, which attempts to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the participant (Smith *et al* 2009). It primarily makes use of a ‘participatory style’, which is ‘an emerging qualitative research approach [that] refers to the use of any art form (or combinations thereof) at any point in the research process (Cole and Knowles 2001; Knowles and Cole 2008) in generating, interpreting, and/or communicating

knowledge' (cited in Boydell et al 2012: unpaginated). It is argued that incorporating creative/art-based resources within the research process promotes dialogue and storytelling (Jones 2006). This was considered important in this context, as Bergold and Thomas (2012:20) identify, there is a basic dilemma in participatory approaches, notably that marginalised communities are usually not in a good position to initiate or control research nor other aspects of their lives, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment, low motivation, reduced opportunity, and lack of personal support strategies and networks (Pettinger *et al*, 2017). Yet, the disclosure of personal views, opinions and experiences of these groups is essential not least when trying to initiate change, develop policy initiatives and/or challenge social exclusion.

The reference to a participatory style is deliberate and distinguishes it from Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves cooperation from research respondents, as they work alongside researchers in the co-production of knowledge, at *all* stages of the research process from research planning, data collection, analysis and interpretation to the publication of findings (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Here, a participatory style incorporates visual methods, or a modified photovoice technique, which has been used to give vulnerable groups access to artistic and creative methods of expression to build skills in disadvantaged communities (Wang et al 2000). A participatory style and photovoice share attributes in common, notably to give respondents a voice to address, challenge and rebalance power relationships (Clarke et al., 2005; Coad et al., 2009; Parsons and Pettinger 2017, Poudrier and MacLean, 2009). Indeed the:

'primary aim of a participatory style is to give members of marginalised groups a voice, or to enable them to make their voices heard. What counts is that they bring their experiences, their everyday knowledge, and their ability into the research process and thereby gain new perspectives and insights (Russo, 2012)' (cited in Bergold and Thomas, 2012:42).

Moreover, when making use of a participatory style, one of the main issues of concern is the creation of a 'safe space' for communication and the development of

trusting relationships, that requires ‘closeness, empathy and emotional involvement’ (Bergold and Thomas 2012:47). Here the emphasis is on research ‘with’ rather than doing research ‘on’ people (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In this case the PeN project also makes use of the autobiographical narrative’s trainees develop around their photographs. Further the dialogue this encourages with the wider community is considered significant. The PeN project therefore serves to highlight the co-constructed nature of narratives and how these can contribute to the development of ‘non-offender’ identities.

The PeN project was introduced to trainees, staff, volunteers and supporters of the RS towards the end of October 2016. I would add, that I am a regular visitor at the RS. Once a week I work one-to-one with a trainee, when we cook lunch for everyone (see Parsons 2017, Parsons 2018). Trainees are also at the RS for a number of weeks before they are approached to participate in the PeN project. Full ethical approval for the project was granted by the University ethics committee and all participants give written consent. All trainees choose a pseudonym and no identifying photographs are used. To date 23 trainees have engaged with the PeN project, taking photographs of their achievements and activities at the RS on a regular basis. These photographs are uploaded and discussed during informal interviews with me. These discussions are led by trainees who chat about what they have been doing at the RS in the weeks preceding, as well as anything of concern/interest to them. They last from 40-120 minutes, with some trainees engaging in interviews up to seven times over the course of their time at the RS (12 months).

The interviews are transcribed *verbatim* and I put together around 600-800 words from these when creating a blog post for discussion with the trainee the following week. The blog posts follow the flow of the interview transcripts, excluding personal information and general chat. In keeping with a participatory style, I endeavour to create a ‘safe space’ for all discussions with trainees. Moreover, the blog posts are considered to belong to them, they are their words as spoken verbatim during the interviews. In the follow up meetings trainees are encouraged to amend, change and/or delete any information from their blog posts, which are then usually posted

the following week, again this gives trainees time to reflect on the content before they are released into the public domain.

All posts are further checked and approved prior to publication by the director of the RS, to ensure there is no identifying information on trainees or defamatory remarks that might put the RS at risk. Since the PeN project began, I have conducted 72 in depth interviews with 23 trainees (11 prisoners and 12 people on community sentences). To date the PeN project has published 71 blogs and the website has had 11,192 views from over 60 countries, with comments, likes and shares from across the various social media platforms. There was an exhibition of photographs at the RS's annual supporters' event in August 2017 and a PeN album produced for some of the trainees on graduation from the RS.

Trainee biographies, like the blog posts are co-created, in that trainees are asked for a biography to be used on the website, during their initial interview. These are then approved by trainees prior to publication ([link 3](#)). Feedback comments made directly on the PeN project blog, or on Facebook or Twitter are also fed back to the trainees, either in follow on interviews for their next blog, or informally once the blogs have been published. Indeed, discussion of reactions from the wider community to trainee's posts is a feature of follow-on interviews and trainees often work with the lead researcher who posts their replies to the comments.

In the context of identifying how the PeN project works in terms of bearing witness to desistance, one case study from Brett will be used for analysis ([link 4](#)). Although all blog posts from trainees are in the public domain on the website ([link 5](#)). Brett was referred to the RS via the local Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), with a 12-month suspended sentence for misuse of drugs. In the past he worked as a self-employed landscape gardener and had his own gardening business for about four years. He always worked until he was forced to stop due to health issues which arose as a result of long-term drug abuse. He is enrolled on a rehabilitation course, which he attends on a regular basis. He is the father of twin two-year-old boys, for whom he has joint custody with his ex-partner, four days per week. However, not long after

he started at the RS social services intervened, preventing him from being the main carer and only allowing him supervised sessions with the boys at weekends, pending an investigation. He started at the RS in December 2016 and started working with me on the PeN project in January 2017. Seven blog posts were published from six interviews during his time at the RS.

Findings and discussion:

Bearing Witness to Desistance

In this section I use excerpts from Brett's blogs, feedback and Facebook comments to demonstrate how the PeN project can be a useful vehicle for bearing witness to desistance (Anderson 2016). Moreover, these posts show how the creation of imagined future selves (Giodarno et al, Hunter and Farrall 2018) can be used to alleviate some of the stigma associated with a 'spoiled' or criminalised identity, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a shift from past to future selves. It is notable that all of Brett's posts had from 78-82 views, that is around 80 people have opened each of his blog posts. This is outside of comments and likes across other social media platforms. The first blog from Brett was published on January 26th, 2017 entitled "It's hit rock bottom, so I can only go up can't I..." ([link 6](#)).

I took the wrong path, and then that has obviously led me here, and then being here is amazing like... there's not a lot of, as far as I'm aware, of places like this for people to come and get their head's straight, and get a starting point back in place in their minds, to start their life again, a lot of people would just drift off into a deeper and deeper hole, especially if they haven't got someone there to stand up and say, hey you know, come here for a bit of support...

The post was accompanied by some of the photographs Brett had taken of work he had been doing in the art room, including a tile he was making with a Batman logo, a superhero Brett identifies as having meaning for him from his childhood.

Image 1: Superhero tile



His post received three comments, notably this one:

This is great to read Brett. You are so right about how amazing and special the place and people that make the resettlement scheme are. You are also right about needing to feel 'ready' to do the rehabilitation and have success with it. Keep positive and I wish you good luck for your future.

Brett replies to Jane a week later, he says:

Thank you very much for your kind words, Brett

What is notable about this post, is that Brett is admitting that he “took the wrong path” and is looking for support to help him change. He also engages in a virtual dialogue with those posting on the website. He continues this theme in his next post on the 10th of February, entitled “This is the first time I’ve needed a bit of back up here”, ([link 7](#)), accompanied by photographs of a sculptural art piece he is working on, that he has called ‘Transformation man’, as he explains:

I was like we should do a superhero for this place and try and represent what this place does for you and what you want to do in your life, you want to change for the better, you wanna walk away from this place one day and be like yeah I've conquered my faults and I am walking away a stronger person, so yeah, so that was like yeah and that was a transformation and so transformation man...

Image 2: Transformation man in progress



Here Brett is imagining a future self, transformed and able 'to walk away a stronger person'. Comments in response to this post, include the following:

- *Fantastic blog from Brett: creating a sculpture which both represents and encourages a transformation in his life. Brett has brilliantly developed the concept for Transformation Man, deciding which materials to use and considering how others will interpret its meaning. A powerful piece of work!*

- *Just loving the whole idea of Transformation man – good one Brett... And we all need back up in our lives, so onwards and upwards now you have found it*
- *Great piece Brett. Keep pegging away and you will maintain that recovery. Hardest thing is asking or accepting help, especially from strangers. But when you try it and it works, you feel so much better. We all need help and guidance from others from time to time...even us independent ones.*

Brett replies, “thank you very much for the comment – it’s nice to know you understand the concept and idea of transformation man, Brett”. Again, this shows Brett engaging in a virtual dialogue with people posting comments on the website. These posts are therefore a means of enabling others to bear witness to Brett’s desistance journey, expressed through his creation of ‘transformation man’, which is simultaneously a representation of his own metamorphosis and imagined future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018).

In Brett’s post on April 6th he highlights the importance of the feedback he has been getting in person and via social media, his post is entitled; “It’s just nice to get feedback off people” ([link 8](#)). This post is accompanied by photographs of ‘Transformation man’ on his plinth, which includes the words ‘out of the darkness and into the light’, as Brett notes in his blog:

to portray something that literally represents from stepping out from the darkness and into the light you know? It’s really done that and now it’s sort of finished in stages and I feel the way I do, compared to what I was like when I first came here... [when] I wasn’t, I didn’t have the, what’s the word? I didn’t have the outlook that I have now, I was still a mess and I was still dibbling and dabbling yeah, I wasn’t ready for the change, but then it was a combination of being here and the situation with my boys, I had to make that change and it’s all worked out... I’ll forever be grateful to this place, it’s definitely saved my life I think really, because when I lost the boys like, I just thought life cannot get any worse and it just seemed like a road that was just so long, unachievable really to get them back, but now I can see the light...

Image 3: Transformation man (to overcome darkness and step into the sun)



This post received comments on both the website and Facebook page as follows:

- *He's great Brett – saw him yesterday when I popped in for my Dorito bowl. Great job, great symbolism. The photo I saw before, with him and Sarah holding the life-buoy, held an even greater message. Like throwing a lifeline to someone going under.... Hooray for Transformation Man and his many messages!*
- *Inspiring and brilliant! Has he(?) got a name yet? May be Mr Awesome and some!!*

Brett says: thank you for understanding and appreciating the concept. He's called 'Transformation Man' because he represents the change, I want to make in my life

In response to this blog, there was also a post from the Poet Laureate for City (2017) who had heard about Brett's 'Transformation man' at a conference, and writes on the website:

Hi Brett. I learnt about your creation from a recent presentation and was inspired by it! I wrote a poem whilst looking at a picture of your sculpture and listening to your incredible story. Here is the poem, I hope you like it!

Brett replies: *Thank you for your kind words, I am massively grateful, and it means a lot that you were inspired to write a poem about Transformation Man, Brett*

Comments on the PeN project Facebook page include these:

- *Go Transformation Man! Loved your blog today Brett and coming to see your handiwork soon :)*
- *This really moved me. That Brett can see the light now is beyond wonderful!*

Brett comments: *Thank you so much for your kind words, they mean a lot. Brett*

Hence, Brett is continuing to engage in a virtual dialogue with those posting responses to his blog posts on the website and Facebook pages. At the end of April social services are concluding their investigations and agree to reinstate Brett's custody of his boys. In his blog post in May ([link 9](#)) Brett says:

I'm really, really confident that I'm not going to use again, but you know equally it's important to me that I can get drug tested, because you know, it just shows to everyone around you that you're still motivated to stay clean, I know you can say it, but it's rewarding almost, because it's like from week to week to week, it's a constant reward, a constant buzz that I'm staying clean, and you know I just feel better that I've found my life, and everything's coming together with my boys... so yeah, it's brilliant, I feel proud of myself actually, it's like I've really turned myself around for my boys...

In this post Brett is clearly identifying the importance of having his drug free status witnessed, not only by those doing the drug testing, but also virtually through social media he is making a permanent declaration of intent and imagining a drug free future self. In Brett's June blog post ([link 10](#)), he explains how he has copied the poem written by the Poet Laureate, which he has then burnt into wood to be displayed alongside the sculpture, as he says:

So the poet laureate did a poem about transformation man, which was really, really flattering yeah, it means a lot that anyone is inspired by my story and you know for him to do that was really, really cool, really epic so I thought it was only fitting really that we write the poem down and put it up next to transformation man really, as a tribute to that really, I think it was really cool that he was moved enough to do something about it

Image 4: Transformation Man poem burnt into wood



In the same post Brett again underlines the importance of imagining a future 'non-criminalised' self, as he says:

I'm really proud of myself and what I've achieved, I never thought I'd be able to beat the addiction really, it's a long time 12 years, I don't like to dwell on the amount of time too much, because it's just wasted years, I don't even remember much, it's funny like when I talk... about my earlier days here, I don't really remember, I was wasted, sad, it's bad, but I was just a mess, and I just have so many not memories, memories are not there, things that have happened, and I'm like really? So now I'm really excited to create memories and have memories long lasting, especially obviously now with the boys, because you have such amazing times with them whatever you do, I want to remember them and cherish them...

Here Brett is generating an imagined future self, as a dad to his boys, he is looking to create good memories for them all, which is something he has not necessarily experienced before. Moreover, the fact that this is being shared in a public space (albeit virtual) ensures that readers of his blog post 'bear witness' to this transformation and his desire to change. There is a joint blog post in July for Brett and Simon ([link 11](#)) who have been working with the person who leads on the market garden at the RS. In this post Brett re-establishes himself as a gardener. Similarly, in his previous post in May, he describes the landscaping he is going to do around 'Transformation man', again re-establishing a future self, based on his previous expertise.

Brett continues his transformation in his September blog post ([link 12](#)), where he also reflects on the talk that he gave at the RS annual supporters' day in August. This again, demonstrates how Brett's transformation is witnessed, this time by supporters (of around a hundred and fifty people), as well as his mum and twin boys. He says:

I came in in December. I'm different in every way now. I can vaguely remember the headspace I was in back then and it was that of a completely different person, in all shapes and ways, the way I looked, the way I interacted with people. Compared to now, it's a complete transformation.

Comments on this blog post come from people who attended the Supporters day, such as a previous trainee from the RS who says:

I heard you speak at the Supporters Day and I think that “Transformation Man” is brilliant. I’m glad that your own transformation means that your boys have a father they can be really proud of – they were proper little characters in the audience when you were speaking Good Luck with whatever comes next for you.

Alongside a comment from the Poet Laureate, who says: “Good luck Brett. I wish you all the best with everything ahead.”

Overall, Brett’s series of blog posts for the PeN project, demonstrate the potential benefits of engaging in a virtual dialogue, that enables a ‘criminalised’ individual to create an imagined future self and to have others bear witness to this transformation. In Brett’s last post, he further identifies an imagined future self:

I’ve been doing my peer-mentoring course and I’m hoping to do some volunteering work with them. I think it’ll be great to be able to help people that have been there. They’re in the same situation that I’ve been in. I think with drug addiction, it’s one of them where it’s really hard, no matter how qualified you are, to be able to get what it’s all about from a textbook. I think it’s a really challenging thing for anyone to get their head around unless they’ve been there, and because I have been there and have managed to get through to the other side, I’m really keen to try and help anyone in the same situation...

This is part of what Maruna (2001) refers to as generativity and demonstrates a shift towards wanting to help others. Moreover, these social connections are considered key to unlocking “the power of the self to change behaviour. Generativity or the desire to do something for others, to repay debts as it were, is a final aspect of ‘making good’” (Rocque, 2017:142). However, not only does the PeN project offer

trainees the opportunity of (re)making social connections with family, friends, and the wider community, but it enables a narrative re-scripting of the past, what Maruna (2001:87) refers to as “redemption scripts,” as he claims:

The way each of us views our own history is interesting not only because of what it reveals about our personality and our background; *this subjective autobiography actually shapes our future choices and behaviour*” (Maruna 1999:05, emphasis in the original)

Hence, it is through the public sharing of past, present and future selves that trainees engage in a mediated social dialogue and a (re)imagining of a future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018). The engagement of an audience, albeit a virtual one, through comments, likes, shares and even numbers of views, is also critical in the co-construction of desistance narratives, it is a moral space and a means of “bearing witness, to see, attend to and testify to lived experience, linked to ideas of narrative, voice and truth” (Anderson, 2016:408).

Concluding Comments:

The PeN project creates a virtual space for the articulation of an imagined future self, with an audience ready to bear witness to their desistance journeys. The PeN project therefore works as a tool for personal development as it enables trainees to focus on photographing their work and achievements as they work to turn their lives around at the RS. The strapline for the PeN project website, is “A window into the RS”, and clearly trainees’ blog posts provide this, they simultaneously offer a unique glimpse into the everyday lives, hopes and aspirations of a group of people that supporters and the wider community may not have seen before. Moreover, the use of social media platforms enables the creation of a dialogue between groups of people in the community that might not ordinarily meet, nor engage in conversation. This is identified in desistance literature as important for successful social integration. The PeN project is significant on a personal level for trainees as well, as they see how their efforts at rebuilding their lives are recognised by others, this is reflected back and enhances self-esteem.

The PeN project crosses interdisciplinary boundaries within and beyond the social sciences, as a creative endeavour that reaches out to a social inclusion agenda for the Arts and builds human, social and cultural capital. The PeN project empowers trainees and challenges the notion that prisoners and/or offenders as an homogenous group. Most significantly PeN enables trainees to take ownership of their desistance journey and this has the potential to continue after graduation from the RS. It underlines the importance of relational interventions, which can also be virtual if they follow Cody's (2001) three criteria and the value of 'bearing witness' to desistance (Anderson 2016).

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